

Inside a protest movement: How climate activists are taking Wet'suwet'en fight from B.C. to Yonge Street

The Toronto Star

February 11, 2020 Tuesday

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Section: NEWS; Pg. 0

Length: 1408 words

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Body

VANCOUVER-Major railway shutdowns are being predicted around the country. There are sit-ins and street protests blocking major intersections in Toronto. Ports being tied up in Vancouver.

How has an Indigenous group's decade-long fight become a national cri de coeur

First there is the cause: The Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs' crusade against a proposed pipeline on their territory. But the second part of the answer lies with a national network of activists, who cut their teeth organizing Canada's largest climate marches. They have helped turned the Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs' message into a firestorm that politicians suddenly cannot ignore.

By Tuesday, protest groups across Canada had blocked rail lines at six locations from British Columbia to Nova Scotia, forced a meeting with Carolyn Bennett, Canada's Minister of Crown-Indigenous relations, by occupying her office for 24 hours, and attempted to block B.C.'s legislators from entering their Parliament building on the day of the speech from the throne.

The stream of protests are over Coastal GasLink's 670-kilometre natural gas pipeline from British Columbia's northeast to Kitimat on the coast, which is opposed by hereditary chiefs of the Wet'suwet'en, one of the Indigenous groups with territory along the pipe's planned route.

The hereditary chiefs have said they will do everything they can to stop Coastal GasLink from building a gas pipeline through Wet'suwet'en territory, even if that means breaking a B.C. court injunction granted Dec. 31, 2019. Mounties have arrested 28 protesters in Wet'suwet'en territory in recent days, according to B.C. RCMP.

But unlike last winter, when a similar temporary injunction was enforced by the RCMP, this was no longer just a local struggle. Climate activists from across the country - galvanized by months of climate strikes and naming colonialism and capitalism as major villains in the plight of climate change - have taken up the hereditary chiefs' message as the embodiment of everything they believe is wrong with Canada's approach to the environment.

Smogelgem, head chief of the Sun house of the Likhts'amisyu clan of the Wet'suwet'en, said it's been a long time coming.

"This has already become a global movement to reclaim our planet, and reclaim it so it does not kill us," Smogelgem said Tuesday. "Because it will."

The Coastal GasLink pipeline will supply a \$40-billion LNG Canada export facility in Kitimat. The company has signed agreements with all 20 elected First Nation councils along its path, but hereditary clan chiefs of the

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Wet'suwet'en nation, who are leaders under the traditional form of governance, say the project has no authority without their consent and are attempting to block its progress despite the injunction.

They're not fighting alone.

When the B.C. Supreme Court granted Coastal GasLink the injunction late last year, the nation's climate activists were swiftly "put on notice" that the injunction may soon be enforced by the police, and were told to get ready to protest.

The key link was a group called the Porcupine Warriors - a collective of Indigenous youth based in Toronto who speak out about environmental issues. Some of their members were on scene at the blockades in Wet'suwet'en territory.

Vanessa Gray, an Aamjiwnaang First Nation member based in Toronto was in touch with Wet'suwet'en members when the injunction was granted to the company.

"It's always a concern when police are arresting matriarchs, when the police are sending helicopters over the healing centre, when police use intimidation tactics on an unarmed, peaceful Indigenous people," Gray said Tuesday from Toronto. "And so it's a lot of collaboration with other Toronto groups ... to work with non-Indigenous allies to put these events together."

Gray has connected with activists like Clement Cheung who organizes with Rising Tide and Climate Justice Toronto. These groups have used the contacts and strategies they gained during climate protests to organize protests supporting the hereditary chiefs in Toronto's financial district, and at the local offices of Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland and Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations Carolyn Bennett.

Cheung, who said he offered his perspective to the Star as a settler youth, said youth activism in Canada has evolved a lot in the last year to the point that young supporters are ready and eager to get out for the Wet'suwet'en chiefs.

"Since January 2019 when the first invasion happened, we saw the eruption of the youth global climate movement," Cheung said. "When we really needed to be a coherent and powerful and unified voice... this all came together."

That includes "hubs" of climate activist groups across the country, Cheung said, and a trove of young people trained in skills like phone banking and organizing demonstrations.

And this new generation of climate activists see the issues of Indigenous rights and the environment as intertwined.

"If we want to effectively halt the climate crisis we need to stand up to colonial violence," he said. "We show up for the climate by showing up for Indigenous struggles."

Harsha Walia, an immigrant rights activist based in Vancouver, said the solidarity protests did not come suddenly, but were sparked by the recent arrests of pipeline protesters.

"They have spent the course of the last ten years building global alliances and networks of solidarity groups. It's not an instant spark," Walia told the Star.

Walia said she first met Wet'suwet'en land defenders when some joined in on protests against the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics happening on "stolen land."

She visited Wet'suwet'en territory on various occasions to learn about their efforts to defend the ecosystem.

In Toronto, more than 100 protesters blocked a rail line on Saturday, stopping at least 68 trains between Toronto and Montreal as well as Toronto and Ottawa. The blockade affected more than 14,000 customers, according to Via.

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Walia is now an unofficial co-ordinator, publicist and communications liaison for the dozens of solidarity actions, some of which are ongoing campaigns and some of which are individual protests, promoting them on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook.

She describes the growing movement as "decentralized," but said Wet'suwet'en leaders have put together a detailed online supporter tool kit.

"The outrage the people feel at this moment about all levels of government, RCMP and Coastal Gasoline as complicit in the violent forced removal of Indigenous people from their territory in an era of so-called reconciliation. The hypocrisy is stark and this is angering people who are protesting," Walia said.

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In Regina on Saturday, a driver plowed through a group of protesters who had formed a blockade on the Albert Street Bridge.

Meanwhile other supporters of the northern B.C. Indigenous group staged a protest at the province's legislature ahead of the throne speech. The premier cancelled his post throne speech news conference due to the protests, and footage from the scene showed protesters barring several politicians and journalists from entering the legislature.

Since Thursday evening, when demonstrators set up blockades in British Columbia and Ontario, CN says more than 150 freight trains have been halted. The ongoing blockades sit near Belleville, Ont., and near New Hazelton in northwestern B.C. Via Rail says 157 passenger trains have also been cancelled, affecting 24,500 travellers on routes between Montreal and Toronto and Ottawa and Toronto.

Federal Transport Minister Marc Garneau says he is working with the railways and his Ontario counterpart Caroline Mulroney to find a solution, and that blockage of tracks is "dangerous and illegal."

But for activists like Gray in Toronto, the stakes are high. Her First Nation community is in a part of Ontario known as "chemical valley" due to the proximity of polluting industrial projects.

"I believe that the violence that we are seeing today of the removal of Indigenous people from their own lands for a Canadian court enforced injunction is the same thing that happened to my own territory," Gray said. "(The Wet'suwet'en) still have clean water. They have a healing water."

With files from Alex McKeen, Wanyee Li and Jacob Lorinc

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: PROTESTS & DEMONSTRATIONS (93%); INDIGENOUS PEOPLES (90%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (90%); CLIMATE ACTION (89%); NEGATIVE MISC NEWS (89%); POLICE FORCES (89%); TALKS & MEETINGS (78%); CLIMATE CHANGE (77%); NATIVE AMERICANS (77%); NEGATIVE NEWS (77%); NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (77%); TYPES OF GOVERNMENT (77%); AGREEMENTS (76%); ELECTIONS & POLITICS

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(74%); POLITICAL & SOCIAL IDEOLOGIES (74%); NATURAL GAS EXPORTS & IMPORTS (71%);
GOVERNMENT ADVISORS & MINISTERS (69%)

Industry: NATURAL GAS PRODUCTS (89%); OIL & GAS FACILITIES (89%); OIL & GAS PIPELINE
CONSTRUCTION (89%); PIPELINE TRANSPORTATION (89%); RAIL TRANSPORTATION (78%); LIQUEFIED
NATURAL GAS (76%); NATURAL GAS (76%); NATURAL GAS PIPELINES (76%); NATURAL GAS EXPORTS &
IMPORTS (71%)

Geographic: VANCOUVER, BC, CANADA (92%); TORONTO, ON, CANADA (79%); BRITISH COLUMBIA,
CANADA (90%); NOVA SCOTIA, CANADA (79%); ONTARIO, CANADA (58%); CANADA (96%)

Load-Date: February 12, 2020

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